

Choose Each Day Joshua 24: 1-3, 14-25; Matthew 25: 1-13

The book of Joshua is seldom used as part of the Lectionary readings- actually used only three times in the current three year cycle of the Lectionary. The book is found between Deuteronomy and Judges in the Old Testament. Where Deuteronomy ends, Joshua begins- the tribes of Israel still camped on the east side of the Jordan River, ready to enter into the promised Land, Canaan.

The theme of the book is the establishment of the nation of Israel in the Promised Land. With God's help the people crossed the Jordan River and took possession of all the main areas of Canaan. If you were to page through the book of Joshua, you would find a record of the taking over of the land of Canaan and dividing its property between the twelve tribes. In the last chapter of the book- this morning's scripture- we find Joshua reminding the people of God's covenant promises to them and instructing them to keep on loving and obeying God.

At this point, Joshua is an old man. He had served God and the people faithfully. Now, near the end of his life, it seems he wanted to do something for God and for the Hebrew people- something that would continue after his death. Joshua called together the twelve tribes of Israel at Shechem, a sacred site for the people.

For some reason, the lectionary leaves out the verses 4-13 of this morning's scripture. Scanning them, we find Joshua's account of all the mighty things God had done for the people- People such as Jacob and Esau, Jacob and his children going down to Egypt, Moses and Aaron being sent and God sending plagues on the Egyptian people, followed by Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. We find them being saved by the Red Sea, being brought through the wilderness and God's helping them take over the land in which they now live. This reminder seems like a wise thing for Joshua to do, for their actions- both past and future- show they have short memories and the reminder also prepares them for what Joshua is about to say.

In verse 14, Joshua drives home his point. Because of all God has done, he calls on the people to commit themselves totally to God. Joshua is reminding them of the very first commandment given to their parents at the foot of Mt. Sinai: "You shall have no other gods before me..." God tolerates no rivals, God commands complete and total allegiance. It is important to note that Joshua gives them a choice, "Choose this day..." But Joshua also sets an example- "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The people chose wisely that day but Joshua doesn't seem convinced that they realize fully what it is they are promising. So, he warns them that this is a serious matter- there will be consequences if they do not follow through. Joshua warns them- if they have made this decision, then their actions should continue to reflect it. They needed to throw away the foreign idols they had taken from the inhabitants of the land.

They were to stop worshiping them, stop participating in the rituals and rites of worship of these gods. "Turn to the Lord and the Lord only." he tells them. Making the decision to follow and serve God is one thing, but following through with it in everyday life can be a difficult thing.

The Hebrew people made their vow to choose to be true to God each day...a wise thing to do. This leads us into the parable in our Matthew scripture often called "of the wise and foolish maidens."

The parable of the maidens is peculiar to Matthew- the only Gospel where it is found. It is an account of ten maidens waiting for the bridegroom to come. Five of them bring extra oil for their lamps while five do not....an overlooked item that would prove costly.

The custom in those days was for the female friends of the bride, at least ten of them- to wait outside her house for the coming of the bridegroom. He would come from his own house to get his bride, take her back to his house for the ceremony and the festivities that followed. The maidens waited outside the bride's home for him to come- sometimes well into the night. Thus, they carried lamps or torches to light the way to the bridegroom's home, often taking a long way to his home through the streets to stretch out the celebration. Since this could take a fair amount of time, it was important to be prepared with plenty of oil. In this parable, some were prepared with extra oil and some were not. Oil could not be shared since that could easily mean everyone would run short on oil. Those who came unprepared had to rush off to try to find more oil. They get back after the door was shut and locked and they can no longer be part of the celebration.

The thrust of the parable is foresight. Many commentaries propose that the bridegroom is the Messiah- the ten maidens represent the Christian community- the delay of the bridegroom represents the delay of Christ's second coming and the rejection of the unprepared maidens represents the final judgment.

On one level, this seems to be a parable of judgment on the scribes and Pharisees- who Jesus had been addressing for some time now. They, of all people, should have been ready for the coming of the Son of Man. But most were not. The wedding took place and they refused to take part. But this parable also speaks to Christians of all ages, times and places recommending constant alertness rather than trying to calculate the time of the End. No one knows when their work on earth is done.

What does it mean to be ready? How do you keep your lamps filled? To answer those questions, we look through scripture and only have to look at the end of this 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew- the lectionary gospel lesson for next week. We prepare by living a faithful life of discipleship each day, which entails deeds of loving kindness to all others around us. But it is possible Stan will talk more about that next week.

Faithful discipleship each day means you do not have to worry about when the Master returns- when God calls you home. You do not have to worry for you will be ready- ready like the five wise maidens. Those who are obsessed with peering into the future for hints and signs of the coming of Christ are actually taking their eyes off the tasks at hand. Employees whose eyes are always on the door to be prepared to see the boss's return usually have something to hide or reason to feel anxious. When the boss gets back, it's pretty obvious who has been working and who hasn't, as obvious as whose lamps are fully lit and whose are flickering out.

Joshua called the people together to a place associated with God, Shechem, to talk to them. Our local place of worship can be our Shechem. We try to gather here- and right now sometimes through the use of a broadcast on television- we gather to remind ourselves of who we are and whose we are, to reconnect with God and with one another. In our world, we are constantly tempted to value and worship other gods, to make other priorities our own. But as we come back to our place of God- wherever that might be- we are reminded that we belong to God. I feel we have gained a greater sense of how gathering together renews our relationship with God. Worship, praise, fellowship, study, service together are like sunlight, water and nutrients to a plant. Right now, we have been forced to change how we do that, how we need to be creative and deliberate about it, but we still need to choose each day to renew our relationship with God and keep connected with each other.

Joshua gathered the people to challenge them, "Choose this day whom you will serve." He then set an example for them by reaffirming his choice of God for himself and his family. But choosing to serve God is not something we do just one day, it should be the first thing we say each and every day, "I choose to serve God this day, this hour!"

Joshua took time to remind the people standing before him of God's mighty acts of deliverance through at least sixty years of the people's history. God's love came first. God's overwhelming grace redeemed and guided this people to the land God had promised. God did everything for them in love. Now they were being asked to love God in return by obeying his covenant command to worship and serve him alone.

So, it is with us, too, is it not, when we commit ourselves to God and the work God places before us? We recognize that God has done everything for us in Jesus Christ, forgiving us, redeeming us from being held responsible for our sins, promising to be with us always- even to eternity. And so, we vow and affirm our faith that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and that we will worship and serve Christ to the best of our ability. We seal our covenant with Christ by our Baptism and renew it by sitting at the Lord's Table to partake of that Holy Supper- which we will do November 29<sup>th</sup> as we begin the season of Advent- moving into the season prior to Christmas.

If you are going to build something, most times you first sit down and count how much it will cost you. Jesus Christ paid the price for our sin. But are we willing to pay the price in return? All those little idolatries of this world to which we give our hearts and efforts, all those habits to which we are so accustomed, all those little compromises we know are wrong? In our humanness, we need to choose each day if we are willing to let our wills and desires be given over to Christ. Are we ready for that, really ready to be covenant partners with our Lord? Joshua confronted the Israelites with such questions there at the holy place of God in Shechem. Joshua prompts us to serious examination of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

This is the message from both Joshua and the gospel of Matthew. How do we prepare for the coming of Christ? We should strive each day to serve God, to make decisions based on bringing God all glory- not ourselves. We do not have to be afraid of the future- and I agree, it is easy to be afraid during these days. Nor do we need to worry about when Christ is coming IF we are living and serving each day the way Christ calls us. That is a promise to be trusted until the end of the age. Amen.

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